

How Can We Measure a Church's Health?

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I Believe in the Church Series

Ephesians 4:7-16

I want to begin by encouraging all of you to sign up for the worship conference that is coming up on May 3-5. This is our major all-church conference for this year. I particularly wanted to speak to those of you who have been in the church for less than four years. You cannot understand what Vineyard is all about unless you get a handle on this issue of worship. We are bringing in some of the best worship leaders that Vineyard has. In fact, they are some of the most popular Christian worship leaders in the world. Some of the folks we have coming here have songs sung in tens of thousands of churches around the world.

I realize some of you can't make Thursday night, Friday night and Saturday morning. You may only be able to go to two sessions. Or if you have little ones, a husband and wife may need to switch off or find a babysitter. But if we are going to be the kind of church that God wants us to be, then we are going to learn together how to worship. And especially for those of you who are newer in the church, I notice as I look around that many of you (and I say this with all affection), but you really don't know how to worship. Folks are looking around. You have your hands in your pockets. You are waiting for the singing to be over so that you can listen to the message. Worship is so integral to what we are trying to do here at Vineyard. I can't urge you strongly enough, before you leave here today, sign up for the worship conference. I think if several thousand of you decided that you were going to go to

the conference, it will make a tremendous change in your life and also in the life of the church.

Now, I have been doing a series from the book of Ephesians before Easter and before I went to Asia. It seems like ten years ago. But I was doing a series in the book of Ephesians, which I want to continue today, a series I have titled, “I Believe in the Church.” And this title was taken from the Nicene Creed where the Bishops from all over the Roman Empire gathered in a city called Nicea, which would be today in modern Turkey. They gathered in this city to hammer out what they understood were the fundamental beliefs required of all Christians. They hammered out in the Nicene Creed belief in God, the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, belief in the full humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, but in the last article of the Nicene Creed, gathered Bishops also said that Christians, if you want to call yourself a Christian, you need to be able to assert with full conviction “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

By catholic, of course, in those days they were not talking about the Roman Catholic church, but little-c catholic, “I believe in a universal, united church.” Not a church that is fractured into 12-trillion denominations, where people attack, criticize and reject each other and each other’s spirituality. I believe in a united church, a church that lives under Jesus Christ, and an apostolic church, a church that is built and grounded on the teaching of the apostles.

What I have been saying throughout this series, over and over again, is that I think the great failing of American Christianity today is that we have lost our faith in one holy catholic and apostolic church. People wonder why they aren’t doing better as Christians. They wonder

why there is such a low level of spirituality among those who call themselves Christians. Why do we struggle with so many addictions? So many divorces? So much relational unhealthiness? Why don't so-called Christians act more like what Christians should act like?

What I've said throughout the series is that we have lost our view of the church and all of the books and tapes, resources, and Christian counseling services in the world won't make up for your lack of connection with the church. Or to state it another way, the great enemy of Christianity in this country is individualism. People believe they can successfully do life and do the Christian life on their own.

"Oh, I might attend a church on Sunday morning and listen to a message." But in terms of really digging in, of being part of a church, where it's not, "I go to your church, pastor Rich," but "I have real ownership here in the Vineyard. This is my church. I am part of this group of people. I have really dug in here and I have people in my life who are challenging me and I am challenging them. I am discovering my place in the church and I am serving and giving."

Folks have a million excuses to prop up what is the American alternative to "I believe in the church." The American version of Christianity is individualistic. The New Testament in the early church would not have understood this. The first thing they would say to a person who claimed to be a Christian is, "What is your relationship to the church? Are you on the periphery, unattached, uninvolved, an observer, a Sunday-morning only, a holiday-only attender?"

I say this with all affection, but the early church in the New Testament would say, “No way, no matter what you say, no matter what you believe, if you are on the periphery, on the edge, if you are a part of the mass of uncommitted in the church, no way are you a healthy, growing Christian. No way, no matter what you say. It is an impossibility.”

Now, let me switch gears for a moment. Back in the 1980’s and 1990’s there was a tremendous amount of work done, I think helpfully, to assist churches to grow. All across America we found churches dying. In some denominations, it was estimated that a third of all the churches would close their doors between 1995 and 2005. I read a statistic that just blew my mind. In one major American denomination, the median age of the church members was 68. 68. If things don’t change for that denomination, if things don’t turn around in the next 15 years, it will practically cease to exist.

All over America you can see churches boarded up, especially in the cities. If you have ever sat in a big old church building that used to house 500 church members on a Sunday – vibrant, there were families and kids going – and you walk in and there are just 25 senior citizens in there. God is blessing these citizens, but it is positively demoralizing.

That’s what you see all over England and all over Europe. You see these dying churches. The Anglicans even have a word for it. They call them “redundant churches.” Talk about a horrible label – redundant churches. All over the UK churches are being sold to Muslims and to Hindus. Talk about a set-back for the kingdom of God. The very place that was devoted and dedicated in this world for the worship of Jesus Christ is now being taken over for the worship of some other god.

We have a rapidly growing pool of young adults who have never been to church. For people in their teens and 20's, less than 25% ever go to church. In some areas of the country, the figures are less than 5%. There is a growing pool of young people who have never had any connection with the church whatsoever. They do not know the storyline of the Bible. They don't really know any of the words to any Christmas carols. They don't know any of the stories. When they think of Isaiah, they don't think of Isaiah the Prophet. Maybe they think of Isaiah Thomas, who played basketball. And all over the world, when someone hears the word "Madonna," they don't think of the Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So the church growth people were on to something when they said, "Hey, we have to start assisting churches to grow numerically because there are churches all over the world that are dying." And there are hundreds of millions of lost people, not just on the far flung mission fields somewhere in Asia, but here in the United States.

Here in the last 10 years there has been another, and I think, more mature question being asked by churches around America. The mature question is not just "how can we make the church grow" but "how can we make the church healthy?" People realize that just because something is big doesn't mean that it is good. Big Mac doesn't necessarily mean Good Mac. Just because we supersize our fries, doesn't mean that those fries are really healthy for us. A big person is not necessarily a healthy person. And a big church is not necessarily a good or healthy church.

So here's the question for today: How do you measure the health of a church? Think with me for a moment. If you go in for your annual, or for some of you, your every decade check-up, the doctor will examine your eyes. He or she will look into your ears and listen to your lungs, check your blood pressure, your cholesterol. If you are a man, your doctor will do another terrible examination. If you are a woman, I have actually no idea what goes on, but it is probably too horrible to think about. There are these indicators of health when you go in for your checkup. Your blood pressure shouldn't be over 120/80. Your cholesterol should be less than 200.

And the apostle Paul, in the book of Ephesians, gives us some measures of a church's health. How do we know if our church, the Vineyard, is healthy? Not just how are we individually doing, but how do we know if the church is a healthy body? What are the tests? What are the indicators of health or sickness?

That's what I want to talk about today in a talk that I've titled, "How Can We Measure a Church's Health?"

Ephesians 4:7-16. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Before I went to Asia, I talked about the first mark of the church's health. We talked about a church's unity, v. 3, where the apostle Paul says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." I tell people in our Newcomers' Class, which, by the way, we are hosting today and next week, our prerequisite for membership. And even if you aren't a newcomer, if you have been here 4-5 years and you are not yet a member, it is time for you to dig in. It is time for you to commit. Come out to our Newcomers' Class this afternoon at 3:30.

But I often say in Newcomers' Class that when you get offended by someone in this church, not if, but when you get offended, because you will get offended. Someone in the children's ministry program will say something to one of your kids that bothers you, or someone will correct the way you are doing something, the way you are serving or the way you are using one of your gifts, or someone will write you a note, or you will hear something from the pulpit, or something will happen in a small group that bugs you – I say to people in Newcomers' Class, "When you get offended, because you can't bring two people together, much less 5000 people together without us offending each other – when you get offended, you will be faced with a choice whether to handle that offense in a biblical way or an unbiblical way."

I tell people that there are thousands of unbiblical ways to handle their offenses. You can leave the church. You can write an angry letter of protest. You can gossip about the person or pastor who offended you. You can call up the Ohio Prayer Line and get lots of prayer from thousands of people about the offense that you experienced and spread the muck around.

Or you can commit yourself to resolving your problems in a biblical way. You can go to the person who has offended you and speak to them graciously.

One of the marks of a healthy church is that people handle their relationships in a biblical way. There is a real emphasis on unity and people are making every effort, they are sparing no expense, they are doing everything possible to eliminate relational disharmony. People in healthy churches, here's a test, spend a lot of time maintaining their relationships. They are concerned about their relationships. They worry about their relationships. They are working hard. It takes tons of hard work, and frankly, a lot of pain to work through issues so that our relationships stay intact. Great relationships are not available for the lazy. Lazy people, apathetic people, indifferent people, people who could care less about what Jesus thinks, or the health of the church, lazy people who just want to get out of here and be entertained, lazy people are incapable of great relationships because it takes a lot of hard work.

And so in a healthy church, the people in the church are committed to doing the heavy lifting, the dirty work of cleaning up the messes that they make relationally. They get up from their corners when the bell rings and they are back out there battling round seven and

round eight for unity. In a healthy church, there are hundreds of conversations going on during the week that sound like, “Are we OK with each other?” “Is everything between us fine?” “Did I hurt you?” “Did I offend you?” There are hundreds of cards, phone calls, and notes going back and forth where people are thanking each other. They are acknowledging each other. They are encouraging each other. They are praying for each other.

Let’s look at today’s text. Along with relational unity, here is a way that you can measure the health of a church. In a healthy church the church embraces the whole. In other words, we ask, “Does the church embrace the whole gospel, the whole message, the whole of the good news of Christ or only a part of it?” We read, *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train, and gave gifts to men.” What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.*

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the church, once told young preachers that the best counsel that he had for them was that they should know the gospel and that they should beat it into the heads of their congregations until the congregation knows the gospel. Maybe the best indicator of a church’s health is how much of the gospel does the church embrace? See, when a church loses sight of the gospel, it will almost always, by degrees, click over either toward increasing moralism on the one hand, behavioral control, or increasing relativism and a therapeutic approach to life on the other. By moralism, I am talking about a church that is filled with people who are trying really, really hard to live by biblical principles. And by relativism I mean a church where biblical principles become really fuzzy and people stop

being clear about what God says. Moralism is truth without grace and relativism is grace without truth.

So in a moralistic church, let me press this out for you, a church that loses sight of the gospel, when you come upon a person who is lying, or a person who is having sex outside of marriage, a moralistic church would say, “Stop it. After all, you are a Christian and you need to behave differently than all those people out there in the world. You need to be a good person, not like those liars and fornicators out there. Behave differently. Try to be better.”

Now, in a therapeutic, relativistic church we would say to a liar or fornicator, “You know, what, after all, is lying or fornication? Who’s to say what it is? Let’s explore together the various cultural approaches to these issues. It is, after all, so complicated to know whether or not you are having sex.” With all due respect to former President Clinton and all the commentators who reflected on the debates going on on college campuses about whether certain kinds of sex really are sex, it is not all that complicated to know if you are having sex or not, unless you have just sunk into relativism and what I call therapeutism. “Let’s explore, together, dear friend, if lying or fornication really contributes to your full personhood. And let’s see why you’ve chosen this path of being a congenital liar or fornicator. Let’s explore your family of origin and dialogue together.”

The approach taken by people in healthy churches, who embrace the whole gospel, is so different. The message is never work real hard so you can behave differently from everyone around you. Who’s to say what’s right or wrong, it’s all so very fuzzy? The question is

always, friend, do you know the life changing power of Jesus Christ? Stop for a moment. Do you grasp in any fashion what Christ has done?

To the person who is sinning, we would say to such a person, “What idol are you trusting in? What are you resting on? What are you using to secure for yourself a happy life, a fulfilled life, a good life in this world and the next, other than Christ? What are you reaching out for that you think is going to fulfill you? Lying? Work? Drugs? Alcohol? Sex? What are you reaching into? Do you have any idea what is available for you in Christ? Do you? Be honest.”

What does your life look like? Let’s just stop for a moment. Is your life characterized by moralism? I try harder. I am like the Avis Corporation. Or is it characterized by relativism? I get so unclear and fuzzy about where the lines are. Or are you regularly stopping and embracing what Christ has done? Finding your identity, your worth, your security and your fulfillment in Christ?

How does Paul describe the gospel here? First of all, we encounter the word “give” and “grace” five times in these verses. *V. 7 To each one of us grace has been given. V. 8 When he ascended on high and led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. V. 11 It was he who gave.*

Healthy churches understand that the gospel message, the whole message is about God giving something – grace, gifts. The gospel is not about our effort to try to change ourselves or make ourselves look better or behave a certain way so that we don’t look like the people out there in the world. The gospel is never about our activity to make ourselves right. It is

about what God has done to secure your happiness. What Christ has done to guarantee you a better life, greater security, more fulfillment. From beginning to end, the gospel is a message of grace.

Paul, in v. 8, says, *When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and he gave gifts to me.* What we need to emphasize, along with the gospel of giving, the gospel of grace, is that the gospel message is a message of conquering. It is a message of victory. It is a message of triumph. *When he ascended on high, he led a host of prisoners captive.* See, this is really important, friends. Because the traditional and very biblical way that the gospel is expressed is to merely emphasize that Christ died in our place as our substitute. That instead of us being punished, Christ was punished. That he paid our penalty. He satisfied God's wrath. There are many verses in the New Testament that speak about Christ's substitutionary work, that he died in our place, he paid our price.

But Paul, here and in quite a number of other places, adds a dimension to the gospel message that frequently goes unstated, a dimension that will change the life of an individual and a church, if we really got it. See, there are a lot of folks who hear about Christ dying in their place, paying their penalty. And they say, "How does that free me right now from my addiction, or liberate me from some kind of demonic power that has me all wrapped up? I am being oppressed. I am under something too strong for me. I see that I don't have to pay the penalty for my sin. But how do I escape from the power of my sin? How do I find freedom now? Deliverance now?"

Healthy churches understand that part of the whole gospel is this idea of Christ conquering, Christ triumphing, Christ reigning victorious, defeating the powers. Jesus said this in John 12. He said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world. Now the prince of this world will be driven out.” There is a judgment and a victory over the world, a judgment and a victory over the power of the evil one.

Paul says the same thing in Colossians 2:15. He writes, “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” The powers, the demons, the power of our addictions – all of that has been triumphed over at the cross.

He says the same thing in 2 Corinthians 2:14, “But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” See, in Paul’s mind when he talks about the gospel as an act of conquest, not just as substitution, but as an act of conquest, he has in his mind the Roman triumph and Christ as the universal conqueror. The highest honor that could be given in Paul’s day to a Roman general was a triumph. They called it a triumph. Before he could get a triumph, he had to be the actual commander in chief in the field. And the campaign had to be completely finished. The region totally pacified. The victorious troops brought home. At least 5000 of the enemy had to die in battle in one engagement. And the Roman territory had to be extended. It wasn’t enough just to repel and attack, there had to be an extension of the Roman Empire.

So in the triumph down the streets of Rome, first the State officials and the Senate would walk and then came the trumpeters and then there were the spoils taken from the conquered land. There would be chariots filled with the booty, with the gold, with the silver, jewelry, crowns, and swords taken from the conquered army. Then there would be pictures of the conquered land, paintings and models of their ships, dragged through the streets. And then beyond that would be the wretched prisoners taken captive, chained up - the foot soldiers, the enemy princes, the enemy leaders, and then finally the enemy generals in chains. They were about to be flung into prison and executed.

And then behind them came the priests swinging their censors with the scent of incense filling the air. And then came the victorious general, in a chariot drawn by four horses, wearing a purple tunic with golden palm leaves, an ivory scepter in his hand with the Roman eagle on it. And in back of him came his family and the victorious Roman army. And throughout the streets, people would scream, "Triumph."

That's what's in Paul's mind when he thinks about salvation. Christ totally defeating the powers, sending them to flight on the field of battle, capturing the booty from them, extending his kingdom, distributing spiritual gifts, spreading fragrance throughout the crowd, and the crowd is yelling, "Victory. Triumph. He has conquered."

Do you think about salvation this way, friend? Is this the gospel message that burns in you down to your toes?

Let me apply this. You are discouraged. You are disappointed. Something in your life is

going really badly. Or a lot of your life is going really badly. You feel totally deflated. You feel like all of the air is gone out of you. What do you do?

Do you try moralism? Just stop it. Behave like a Christian. You should be smiling and rejoicing, so put on a happy face. Or do you try relativism? You know, it really doesn't matter what I believe. It's all just the same. Nothing really matters. Nothing really makes a difference.

Or when you are deflated and discouraged and disappointed, do you say, "Right now, my great need is to embrace the whole gospel. Christ has triumphed. Right now I may be experiencing a set back because of my health, or because of what's going on in my family, or because of my job situation. Because of my marriage, I have experienced a temporary setback, a temporary disappointment, a bump in the road. But Christ has triumphed. He is the victorious general riding in his chariot and I am behind him following in this great precession and he is throwing gifts to me."

I am not saying there aren't bumps in the road. I am not saying that we don't experience real pain. But is there at the core of your being a conviction about the triumph of Jesus Christ and your part in it? Is there at the core of your being the sense that no matter what is going on around me, Christ has conquered and has let me share in his victory? That's why we read the stories that we do of the early church and the way they dealt with persecution and hardship and imprisonment. It wasn't by moralism – behave differently, or relativism – it really doesn't matter whether I bow down to the emperor and call him Lord or if I call Jesus Lord. The early church had this thing inside, this conviction, where they really were

able to say, “Well, you can beat us if you want. It hurts. But we have already won and you’ve lost.” This is how they sang when they were in prison. This is why Christians throughout the ages have had this note of joy about them.

Do you get it? Is there a note of joy about your life? I don’t say to just smile and try to make yourself happy. I say get a hold of the gospel. Not behave differently, but grab hold of what Christ has done.

Vv. 8-10 about Christ descending and ascending are some of the most difficult verses in all of Paul’s writings to interpret. I have read seven different commentaries and come up with nine different explanations. Probably the best two interpretations about what Paul is talking about here: He says, *What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.* Probably the best two interpretations are either that the descent of Christ refers to his coming to earth in his incarnation. He is taking on humanity. In his humiliation, his suffering, his crucifixion.

Or the descent has to do with the descent of the Spirit. Paul is perhaps talking about the ascension of Christ and the dissension of the Spirit. This isn’t as wild as it sounds. Psalm 68, from which v. 8 was quoted, was used early on in Jewish synagogues on the Day of Pentecost. It is possible, we don’t know, but it is possible that Paul is quoting a Pentecost Day Psalm. He is showing that what Psalm 68 is really pointing to is the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God and the descent of the Spirit to the earth.

A healthy church grasps the whole gospel – the gospel of the triumph of Christ, the gospel of us sharing in his triumph, the gospel in which the powers that we seem to not be able to overcome have been overcome, have been broken by Jesus, a gospel that invites us to share in his life-changing Spirit, a gospel in which Jesus, then, gives as booty to his followers spiritual gifts. V. 8 *That is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train, and gave gifts to men.”*

It is a real problem and a mark of unhealth in a church when a church denies that spiritual gifts exist or deny that some of the gifts exist. It’s a denial of part of the victory of Christ. It is a rejection of part of the glory and the triumph of his cross, his resurrection and his ascension.

So when we talk about healing or the gift of tongues, or hospitality or prophesy, and we say, “We believe in these things in the Vineyard,” and we do, the picture that is in our mind is of Jesus, the conquering general, with these spiritual gifts, throwing them out to the crowd – the whole gospel, the whole good news, Christ ascended, Christ descended, Christ victorious, Christ crowned.

Now a healthy church not only embraces the whole gospel, but the leaders and the people know their roles. We read in vv. 11-12 *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

It is interesting that the gifts that Christ has given to the church that are mentioned here, not in 1 Cor. 12, but here – the gifts are people who are serving in various roles. People are the gifts. Jesus Christ, when he gives his booty, the treasure of his triumph, doesn't give things to people, Jesus Christ gives people to people. Do you understand that? Have you ever said, "You know, woman's group leader, small group leader, counselor, that particular teacher, she or he is a gift to me. Not that I just appreciate your gift of music, but I appreciate you. You are the gift of Christ to me."?

I just want to say one thing before we look at the individual gifts and that is that it is really important that we not get caught up in titles here at Vineyard. Jesus warns us about that in Matthew 23 when he says that the Pharisees love to be greeted in the marketplace and have men call them rabbi. He says that you aren't to be called rabbi, you have one rabbi, even the Christ, and don't let anyone call you teacher. You have one teacher. Whenever we start talking about these various roles in the church, I am always concerned because I view it as a mark of unhealth when a church really starts labeling people and putting titles on them – I am apostle/prophet Smith and they have it on their business card. Apostle Smith or Prophetess Jones. When someone asks me, "What should I call you? Should I call you reverend or pastor," I generally say, "You could call me Rich, that would be a good start." It's not that I'm offended if someone calls me pastor Rich, but in a healthy church people do ministry, they don't worry about titles.

So what are these various roles for the leaders? Paul mentions that Christ gave some to be apostles. Now in the sense of the original Twelve, the Lamb's Twelve, the Twelve that speak the authoritative word of God that is binding on us for a long time, the folks that were

to be witnesses to the resurrection, there are no more big-A apostles, no more authoritative revelation that we all must obey to be saved. But the New Testament does speak about little-a apostles, leaders of movements, people who lay foundations for new patterns of Christian community, folks who are the initiators not just of one church, but of hundreds and hundreds of churches and they lay the pattern down for what those churches are to be like. There are little-a apostles.

And he speaks of prophets. Now no one speaks flawlessly these days like the Old Testament prophets. That's why we need to discern, listen and sift the words of prophets these days. But there are men and women who build the church by speaking God's mind on a subject under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. People who stand in the counsel of God and who listen to what God's Spirit is saying and then they deliver it so that the body is built up and encouraged.

There has been a lot of interest expressed in the Vineyard regarding the gift of prophecy. I have had a number of people approach me and say, "When are we going to get some training in the gift of prophecy to learn how to hear God's voice and deliver it?" We have a training center class, mark this down. If you have been coming and saying, "I want to learn about Vineyard's approach to the gift of prophecy," May 25th, Friday night and May 26th, Saturday morning, we have a class here on the gift of prophecy. And then we are going to do some other things to accommodate the work of God's Spirit in our midst.

One of the things we are going to try to do is try to open up a couple of rooms here so that following up on ministry time we can have more extensive prayer following each service. If

God is doing something in a person's life, we want to accommodate that by not ending the prayer after five minutes saying, "See you, be warm and be filled."

Then we have evangelists. These are folks who build the body by numerical addition. They are the obstetricians in the body. They assist with the birth of new Christians. And once the babies are born, they need to be fed and nurtured by pastors and teachers. Pastors and teachers are the pediatricians, the moms and dads, of the body. They care for the newborn babies. They help mature the church in a healthy way. In fact, probably pastors and teachers were probably one gift – pastor/teacher – not two.

But these gifts were given not to do ministry, but to prepare God's people for works of service. In other words, apostle, prophet, evangelists, pastor and teacher are people who train, who equip the people of God to do the ministry. I have used this picture before, but I think in most churches the picture that people have of the role of pastor is that the church is up in the stands and the pastor is down on the field. The church yells down and cheers the pastor on and says, "Go pastor, run harder, throw the ball, kick the ball, catch. Oh, stupid pastor, bad play. Let's get another pastor in here to entertain us."

The model of the healthy church that the apostle Paul was describing is the church not in the stands, but out on the field. The pastor, as a coach, is urging them on saying, "Go, church go. Throw the ball, catch the ball. Stupid church, no...no...no. Try again, church." See, stated more plainly, unhealthy church is a church where one person who is called THE minister does everything. He visits the sick, he preaches the sermons, he counsels, he makes the coffee.

This is not Ephesians 4:11-12. A mark of a healthy church is when the people know their roles. The leaders are there to train, to motivate, to encourage, to push the church to do the ministry. And the people in the church visit people in the hospital, feed the sick, and evangelize, counsel and care for, pray for. That when someone has a baby in the church, it is not pick up the phone and call the professionals. Rather, a group of people gathers around and celebrates the birth of the new baby and brings meals.

The cover of a church bulletin I saw some years ago put it so well. It said, “So and So Senior Pastor; this other person Associate Pastor;” and then it said, “Ministers, the entire congregation.” That’s what the Bible teaches. That’s the mark of a healthy church – ministers, the entire congregation.

Do you take that role for yourselves, Vineyard Church, that you are the ministers? That it’s not pick up the phone and call a professional. It’s not wrong, but in a community of 5000-6000 people, it’s we together do the ministry. One of the marks of a healthy leadership team is that they release and set the church free to minister.

Healthy churches embrace the whole; healthy churches know their roles; and healthy churches pursue the goal. V. 13 *Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.* John Wimber, who was the founder of the Vineyard movement, said that most churches play church the way that men play fantasy basketball. Have you ever watched a guy or teenager play fantasy basketball? The team is down by 2, Nathan dribbles over the half-court line, he has two

men defending him, they set a trap, he dribbles through the trap, drives to the top of the key, seconds are ticking off the clock, 3-2-1 – Nathan lets it fly from 35’...swoosh...nothing but net. The home team wins. The crowd goes crazy. Fantasy basketball – no ball, no hoop, but boy we feel good. Most churches play church the way that men play fantasy basketball. Well, we all feel good. We’ve all had an experience. But what is it we are after?

Why should we embrace the whole and know our roles? Paul says we are after these three things: unity in the faith – the goal of church life is not just doctrinal agreement, but deep relational unity around Jesus Christ. We just can’t rest until our relationships are healed and whole. We are reconciled not only within the Vineyard, but across denominational lines – with Grace Brethren, World Harvest, Rhema. What are we aiming at here in Vineyard? Reconciliation, unity in the faith.

We are not only aiming at unity in the faith, but in the knowledge of the Son of God – intimacy. Paul doesn’t say we are aiming at our goal, when the ball is in the bucket, that we would know about the Son of God. He talks about knowledge of the Son of God. Healthy churches are full of people whose hearts’ cry is the same as Paul’s heart’s cry in Philippians 3, *Oh that I might know him.* The average church member in American churches today doesn’t know Jesus Christ any better than an 8-year old in Sunday School. If you ask the average church member, “Who is Jesus?” “Oh, Jesus Christ is my Savior and my Lord.” An 8 year old in Sunday School could say that.

But do you know him? Do you know what he feels towards you? Do you have deep assurance of Jesus’ thoughts and feelings towards you? Do you know what Jesus’ voice

sounds like? Do you know him not only as Savior, but as provider, as lover, as counselor, as your teacher, as the one who never leaves you or forsakes you?

A healthy church aims at unity. A healthy church aims at intimacy. And a healthy church aims at maturity. Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

This stretches me beyond what I can wrap my mind around. But Paul is talking about a church that one day, standing back to back with her Lord Jesus Christ, will be as big and healthy as he is big and healthy. I mean, I can't even say that without wanting to put my hand over my mouth. That this little enterprise that we call the church, Vineyard, and the million other groups, big and small, around the world – the goal is not that we would wimp out in the end and deny our faith. The goal is that we would be so full of Jesus Christ that we would stand as tall as he stands. That we would have as much purity and power as is possible for humanity to contain.

Does this excite you? Will you let your heart be filled with the renewed sense of the triumph of Christ, with the calling on your life to do ministry – to do it, not just talk about it, or argue about it or define it, but to do the work of ministry, so that in the end together we as a church and churches all around would be united, intimate with our God, standing up tall, filled with the presence and the power and the gifting of our Lord Jesus Christ – a healthy church? Let's pray.

How Can We Measure a Church's Health?

Rich Nathan

April 21-22, 2001

I Believe in the Church Series

Ephesians 4:7-16

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